The Lovejoy Homestead: the Underground Railroad in Illinois

Michelle Hollander
Teacher: Michael Pomatto
St. Bede Academy, Peru

As a person is traveling U.S. Highway 6, near the intersection of Illinois 26, they will see a traditional white farmhouse just outside the city of Princeton. One may not think anything of it until they read the sign: “Owen Lovejoy Homestead—Underground Station." After visiting this landmark, they would soon find out that this is not just any old farmhouse, but a house listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Lovejoy Homestead was one of Illinois's most active stations on the Underground Railroad, which was a loosely organized, highly secret system that helped thousands of slaves escape the South for freedom in the North. As a result, Princeton became known locally and nationally as a safe haven for these runaway slaves.

Owen Lovejoy lived at this historic site in Illinois. He was a fearless leader in the Underground Railroad, a fiery abolitionist, a gifted speaker, a passionate Congressman, and a fervent family man. Lovejoy was born on June 6, 1811, on a farm in Albion, Maine, where he was raised in a religious atmosphere. He attended Bowdoin College in 1830, but left school in 1833 after the death of his father. Eventually Lovejoy moved to Alton, Illinois to live with his older brother, Elijah, and entered the ministry. His older brother encouraged him to join his fight against slavery. Elijah Lovejoy was the publisher of the *Alton Observer*, a famous abolitionist newspaper. The publication created much controversy, and the residents of the town were hardly supportive of his view. After three of his printing presses had been thrown into the river, he placed his new one in a

warehouse for safekeeping. Nonetheless, it did not stop a pro-slavery mob from setting the warehouse on fire and shooting Elijah. As Owen was kneeling next to his brother's dead body, he experienced a turning point in his life. He was quoted, "While I was beside the prostrate body of my murdered brother, Elijah, with fresh blood oozing from his perforated breast, on my knees, alone with the dead, I vowed never to forsake the cause for which his blood was sprinkled." He knew that he was obligated to never give up the cause which his brother had fought for.

After this tragedy, he moved to the North. As he was traveling, he came to a fork in the road. He could not decide which road to take, so he dropped the reigns, said "giddap," and allowed the horse to choose. It took the east fork, which eventually led to Princeton.

He became a pastor in Princeton at the Hampshire Colony Congregational church in 1838. Although he was only twenty-seven years old, he was powerful and alert, and deeply involved in his faith. He was an impressive and persuasive speaker. While he was giving an anti-slavery sermon, some of the members of his congregation walked out. He shouted after them, "I shall preach this doctrine until you like it and then I will preach it because you like it! His conviction that slavery was wrong continued to change the views of many throughout his life.

He lived with Butler and Eunice Denham, a family from his congregation. A few years later, Butler died, and soon after Owen and Eunice were married. They had six children, not including Butler's three daughters. This home became one of the many stations of the Underground Railroad. It was built with black walnut lumber and consisted of fifteen rooms and many narrow hallways. The Lovejoys fed, clothed, and sheltered the slaves and helped them leave on their journey. Slaves were hidden in an

area behind a dresser, a large storage area above the stairway, in the cornfield, in the barn, and in the basement.

Lovejoy was both hated and loved in the small community of Princeton. Even though the town was active in the Underground Railroad, there were still many pro-slavery people in the area. Once, Lovejoy's life was threatened against appearing on main street. However, this did not affect him, and to show his courage he rode down main street many times. No one ever bothered or mistreated him.

One noteworthy event was John Bowen's escape. Bowen was a mulatto slave who had fled from Missouri and arrived in Princeton in 1849. He thought he was safe in the community until his owner surprised him and recaptured him. While his owner was in the courthouse, Bowen was tied to a nearby tree. He managed to escape and ran to the Lovejoy home. Lovejoy arrived at the house before the crowd, and he stood outside with a gun and warned them not to enter. Meanwhile, a huge crowd had gathered in Lovejoy's yard. Suddenly, a dark man was spotted riding off on a horse. They chased him to find that it was not Bowen. Meanwhile, no one noticed a "lady" in a large sunbonnet riding away in a small carriage.

In an attempt to spread his view, Owen Lovejoy entered politics. He was elected for the Illinois House of Representatives, and later for the United States House. While Owen was in Congress, he constantly fought for an end to slavery. He served until his death in 1864.

In 1863, Owen Lovejoy became very ill with Bright's disease. Although the Emancipation Proclamation had been passed, many slaves were not free, and Lovejoy

believed that his work was not complete. He died on March 25, 1864. He was buried at Oakland Cemetery in Princeton, Illinois.

After both Owen and Eunice's deaths, their children lived in the Lovejoy home. Soon thereafter, the children moved out, and the house was left desolate. However, the homestead had too much significance in the history of Illinois to be neglected and forgotten. The house was respected because it represented a great soul. Then in April 19, 1967, the state of Illinois Department of Conservation purchased the homestead and began renovating it.

The Lovejoy Homestead is a significant asset to Illinois's history because it is one of the few Underground Railroad stations open to the public. The homestead gives a rare look into the life of a runaway slave, exposing the hiding places and explaining the dangers of the escape. Today, the Lovejoy Homestead is owned by the City of Princeton, and was named a National Historic Landmark in 1997. It carved an important place in the nation's history, and is a crucial part of Princeton's legacy. [From John Barron, "It's like this...," LaSalle, Ill. *News Tribune*, (July 10, l972); John Barron, "It's like this...; LaSalle, Ill. *News Tribune*, (April 30, 1976); John Drury, *Old Illinois Houses*; Melanie Grivfitti, "Historian Steps Into Abolitionist's Shoes," LaSalle, Ill *News Tribune*, (Sept. 19, 1992); "History of the Owen Lovejoy Homestead," www.loveioyhomestead.com, (Nov. 2l, 2002); "Lovejoy Homestead," www.princeton-il.com/areadirectory/specialevents/loveioy.html, (Nov. 21, 2002); "The Lovejoy Homestead," www.lincoln.lib.niu.edu/culturaltourism/hazelsims/index.html, (Nov. 21, 2002); Lovejoy Society, "Owen Lovejoy," www.lovejovsocietv.org, (Nov. 21, 2002); "Owen Lovejoy Homestead," www.travelthepast.com/SiteDetails.asp?PK=l 812, (Nov.

21, 2002); David Silverberg, “"Underground' Routes Crisscross North Central Illinois," LaSalle, Ill. *News Tribune*, (July 7, 2001); George Owen Smith, *The Lovejoy Shrine*.]